

Diwali

A short summary of why different faith groups celebrates Diwali

Diwali will be celebrated by different faith communities from 5th November onwards this year, depending on which part of the world you live in. The dates vary each year according to the night of the full moon and celebrations can last up to a week. Diwali is often described as the “festival of lights”. The name of the festival comes from the Sanskrit word Dipavali, meaning row of lights. It is a festival that different faith communities celebrate including Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains. The day is marked as an official holiday in India, but other countries also celebrate Diwali, especially where there is a significant Indian population e.g. Sri Lanka, Nepal, Mauritius, Myanmar, Trinidad & Tobago, Guyana, Fiji, Singapore, and Malaysia.

Like Christmas in the West, Diwali is very much a time for buying and exchanging gifts, lighting lamps (divas) and fireworks and handing out sweets. Diwali is also a traditional time to redecorate homes. In towns in India (and in Britain), lights are often used in Diwali displays and many cities have fabulous Diwali festivities, bringing both faith and non-faith communities together to celebrate – Leicester being one of the most popular of destinations to visit during this time of year.

The main theme of the Diwali festival celebrates the victory of good over evil, light over darkness and knowledge over ignorance; however, the actual legends that go with the festival vary in different parts of India and within different faith groups. Below is a brief description of Diwali, explaining why and how different faith groups celebrate it.

Hindu

It is believed that Diwali is primarily a Hindu festival, but even within this religion, it is celebrated by people from different parts of India for different reasons. Some people believe that it is the celebration of the marriage of Lord Vishnu with Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. In Bengal, devotees offer prayers to Mother Kali (Hindu goddess – destroyer of evil forces). In Maharashtra, prayers are held for Lord Ganesh, the symbol of auspiciousness and wisdom. Diwali is also held to commemorate the return of Lord Rama along with his wife Sita and brother Lakshman to Ayodhya after their 14 years of exile, and Rama’s victory over the demon-king Ravana. The Marwari and Gujarati communities celebrate Diwali as their New Year.

Sikh

For many Sikhs, Diwali is also known as Bhandi Chhor. It is particularly important because on this day in 1619 the sixth guru; Guru Hargobind Ji and 52 other captured princes were released from prison. Sikh tradition teaches that the ruling Mogul Emperor Jahangir had imprisoned Guru Hargobind and 52 princes for fighting for the protection of religious freedom. As a result, he saw them as a religious, political and military threat to his kingdom. The release of Guru Hargobind Ji has been known as Bandi-Chhor since the day of his release from prison, more so because he was instrumental in securing the release of all the other princes that were imprisoned with him. “Bandi-Chhor” here means “the liberator” – Bandi means prisoner, and Chhor means release. Since that day, Sikhs from all over the world have been celebrating the Bandi Chhor Divas on Diwali day. In India, the day is marked with the annual lighting up of Sri Harmandir Sahib (The Golden Temple) with candles, lamps, firework displays and different festivities. The entire city of Amritsar is lit up. Elsewhere in the world, Gurudwaras (Sikh places of worship) are also decorated, and Langar (food from a free kitchen) is served to all and sweets and gifts are shared.

Buddhist

People following Buddhism from across the world celebrate Diwali as an auspicious day. To them, this is the day when Emperor Ashoka gave up everything and adopted the path of peace. He decided to convert to Buddhism around 265 BC. The day is thus marked as "Ashok Vijaydashami". It is a day when Buddhists everywhere will chant mantras (hymns) to remember Lord Buddha, and the Emperor. Diwali has a special significance for Buddhists for another reason. To them, the spiritual insight of Diwali is the triumph of good over evil as Emperor Ashoka gave up his violent ways and chose the path of peace and non-violence.

Jain

Diwali is a special day in the Jain calendar as well. This is the day when Lord Mahavira attained Nirvana, or eternal bliss. Diwali is therefore celebrated as 'Mahavira Nirvan Divas' also called 'Mahavir's Nirvan Kalyanak Divas' which means the Lord Mahavir's Attainment Anniversary. Bhagwan Vardhman, also known as Mahavira, was the last of the 24 Tirthankaras or prophets of Jainism. It is said that he attained nirvana on October 15th 527 BC at Pavapuri, which is in today's Bihar (Eastern Indian state), which was then Diwali day. People from the Jain community across the world would remember Mahavira on this day and celebrate this occasion.